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ABSTRACT

This bulletin presents findings of a study that examined the meaning of school restructuring to those who are involved in it. Data were derived from a survey of 238 practitioners actively involved in restructuring projects--131 principals, 95 teachers, and 12 others--from 12 elementary, middle, and high schools in 30 states. Findings suggest that restructuring differs from reform (restructuring was viewed as bottom-up change and reform as top-down); is an effort to change schools comprehensively and dramatically; is a local initiative; is carried out largely by school professionals; and is a long-term strategy that will not necessarily have immediate and conventionally measurable results. Respondents identified local attitudes and practices as the greatest obstacles to reform. Implications are that restructuring requires significant changes in decision making relationships, the reeducation of participants, and a great deal of school professionals' time. Three tables are included. (LMI)

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School Restructuring in Practice

by Carl Lashley
and Gerald R. Smith

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

A national study conducted by researchers at Indiana University provides insights into the diverse changes that are taking place in schools today under the rubric "restructuring." Study participants—educators involved in school restructuring—believe restructuring is dramatically different from the reform efforts of the past, not least in its requirement that we fundamentally revise our views of how change occurs and of the roles and relationships of the participants in the change process.

Many observers of public education today believe that the time has come for a fundamental reconfiguration of the purposes, organization, and operation of schools. School restructuring has been offered as a means to such an end. However, the many different meanings attached to the idea of restructuring make understanding its potential for public school improvement difficult. Critics argue that this lack of a single, comprehensive definition is one weakness of the restructuring movement. Even educators and policymakers who support restructuring often find it difficult to make decisions about a movement with such a range of meanings.

To help bring clarity to this complex issue, researchers at Indiana University recently conducted a national study, supported by a grant from the Proffitt Endowment, that asked: What exactly does restructuring mean to those who are involved in it? A nationwide sample of individuals knowledgeable about and experienced in restructuring was selected and surveyed for their conceptions of the focus, assumptions, issues, goals, obstacles, and models of restructuring. Researchers surveyed two groups, theorists who had written about restructuring and practitioners who were active members of restructuring projects.

Because the views of practitioners are of primary importance to policymakers, we focus here on the responses of this group—131 principals, 95 teachers, and 12 others whose schools were reported to be involved in restructuring projects. Replies were received from 129 elementary, middle, and high schools in 30 states representing every region of the United States. This response of 238 practitioners represents 67% of the 356 practitioners to whom surveys were sent.[1] In addition to presenting practitioners' views of restructuring, this bulletin includes our reflections on policy issues raised by the survey.

Major Findings

Although the survey covered a wide range of issues about restructuring, the responses of the practitioners provide evidence for six findings of special relevance to policymakers.

I. Restructuring differs from reform.

The majority of practitioners (59%) see restructuring as different from reform, in part because they see restructuring as bottom-up change while they see reform as top-down. Our study shows that school restructuring contrasts sharply with the federal

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EA 025 409

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approaches to educational reform in the 1960s and 1970s and more recent state level approaches. As one practitioner put it,

> When I think of reform, I think of policy and top-down. Restructuring brings to mind grass-roots efforts and very personalized, individualized, unique efforts. No two restructuring schools would go about things in the same way or end up looking the same.

Practitioners were often dubious about reforms of public schooling since the ideas often emanate from persons who are least knowledgeable about public school classrooms. One individual noted,

> DOE [the department of education] keeps changing the rules and expectations before the process even gets good and started. Our state legislature is demanding changes in the schools but they (legislators) don't know squat about the real world of teaching!

Another expressed concern about the "reluctance of state officials and district level officials to allow change to happen," saying "they have the tendency to continue to regulate." Practitioners also expressed frustration at being held accountable for solutions they had no part in formulating, and they resent being blamed when these ideas do not succeed.

Reflections. From the practitioners' perspective, then, an important element of restructuring is the need for flexibility so that decisions can be tailored to the unique circumstances of the students, schools, and communities. Practitioners in this study are skeptical about policymakers' willingness or ability to provide guidance that is not overly prescriptive. The school's need for autonomy and flexibility and policymakers' interest in continuity and efficiency spark creative tensions that must be resolved for restructuring efforts to begin and for them to be successful.

TABLE 1

Practitioners' Perceptions of the Goals of Restructuring

Goal	*% Selecting Goal*
Greater student achievement	92%
Improved educational programs	84%
Improved teacher commitment	82%
Greater community involvement	82%
Improved student commitment	82%
Improved parent commitment	77%
Greater teacher autonomy	77%
Greater student involvement	74%
Greater school authority	66%
Improved administrator commitment	57%
Broader school governance structure	55%
Improved working conditions	48%
Changing central office roles	42%
Smaller schools	24%
Other	25%

II. Restructuring is an effort to change schools comprehensively and dramatically.

Those involved in restructuring see it as an effort to change a wide range of current practices in order to achieve multiple purposes. When asked about the goals of restructuring, practitioners identified on average nine different goals. As Table 1 shows, the two most important goals were greater student achievement (92% of respondents) and improved educational programs (84%). Similarly, when asked about the focus of their efforts, practitioners identified on average six different focuses. As Table 2 shows, the most frequently cited focuses were decision making (82%) and curriculum and instruction (81%).

Practitioners see reform as an incremental tactic directed at marginal improvement of existing practices, while they see restructuring as a systemic strategy aimed at fundamental change. Although a small number (11%) of practitioners envisioned restructuring as an effort to improve existing approaches to schooling, 28% said it requires the development of new paradigms, and 58% believed restructuring requires both strategies.

Reflections. Policymakers should consider whether the policies they adopt will lead to incremental reform or to

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fundamental restructuring of public schools. Participants in this study clearly have concerns about the effectiveness of incremental approaches to educational change. In the opinion of these local teachers and administrators, incremental strategies are likely to result in modest and slow modification of existing models. Whether such approaches will fill the need for significant educational change that prepares students to meet the challenges of the 21st century is questionable.

TABLE 2

Practitioners' Perceptions of the Focus of Restructuring

Focus	*% Selecting Focus*
Decision making	82%
Curriculum and instruction	81%
Roles and relationships	74%
Use of time	61%
Resource allocation	51%
Values and beliefs	50%
Grouping and tracking	48%
Distribution of power	46%
Computers & other technology	46%
Working conditions	41%
School within a school	33%
Other	8%

III. Restructuring is a local initiative.

The school and the people most closely associated with it are most likely to be affected by restructuring efforts. Ideas for change that arise from the grassroots level through consensus building create a sense of ownership of initiatives at the school level. Ownership, in turn, means a greater sense of responsibility to see that the solutions work in the school and classroom.

When asked about the level at which their restructuring efforts were focused, 61% of practitioners responded that their projects were concentrated at the school level. When we asked practitioners to tell us who benefits from restructuring, students were named by 96%, followed by teachers (95%), parents and the community (84%), and school administrators (75%). However, a much smaller percentage said that restructuring benefits individuals outside the local school—district administrators (31%), union officials (21%), or board members (18%). As one practitioner put it, "Restructuring is something school-based administrators and teachers do to solve problems at their school." Another said, "Restructuring allows the school unit to arrive at [its] own strategies to meet goals. Many more classroom teachers are involved in developing concepts and means."

Reflections. By its nature, restructuring cannot be mandated, but it can be nourished, and the state must remain flexible in exploring ways to provide that nourishment. What may work well in one school or district may not work in another. To be effective, state efforts must be designed to complement local initiatives by permitting a reasonable degree of flexibility in how funds are used and in which regulations are to be relaxed.

IV. Restructuring is carried out largely by school professionals.

Although the school restructuring literature commends increased involvement of parents and community members, the data from our study suggest that restructuring is mostly a professional phenomenon. As Table 3 shows, teachers and principals were seen as the two groups primarily involved in restructuring—by 83% and 82% of practitioners respectively. By contrast, only 23% of practitioners reported that parents were highly involved in restructuring; 24% reported that students were highly involved. In fact, no group outside of education professionals was perceived as having a significant role in restructuring by more than 31% of practitioners who responded to our survey.

Responding teachers and principals value giving schools greater authority over the educational programs they are expected to implement. As they see it, such authority develops leadership, strengthens commitment, improves productivity, and places responsibility squarely where it belongs—in the hands of teachers, principals, and, to a lesser extent, parents within the school community.

Reflections. This finding—that in practice restructuring emphasizes professional control of schools—leaves unanswered the question of whether the larger public interest in education is well served. Often, professionals carefully consider the public interest as they plan for dramatic change, but predominantly professional control over education runs the risk that parochial or professional values may take precedence over those supported by the public at large.

TABLE 3

Practitioners' Perceptions of Those Involved in Restructuring

Group	*% Perceiving High Involvement of Group*
Teachers	83%
School administrators	82%
District administrators	46%
Business leaders	31%
Union officials	26%
Students	24%
Parents	23%
Board members	21%
Community members	21%
Media	18%

V. Local attitudes and practices are the greatest obstacles to restructuring.

Sixty-eight percent of practitioners identified the beliefs and values of the persons involved in restructuring as the major barrier to success. Practitioners also noted resistance from people outside the school, such as school board members, superintendents, and district administrators. However, given the rhetoric that surrounds deregulation and decentralization, we find it interesting that only about half of the participants listed state or district policies as barriers to restructuring.

Reflections. From this observation, we suggest that those who are interested in restructuring move ahead with their plans for change despite perceived regulatory restrictions. If their experience is anything like that of our sample, state and local policies will present fewer roadblocks to restructuring than will existing local beliefs and values.

VI. Restructuring is a long-term strategy for improvement that will not necessarily have immediate and conventionally measurable results.

On the whole, practitioners indicated that restructuring efforts thus far either held promise but had not yet realized success (55%) or had some clear but limited success (23%). Practitioners also reported a concern about professional or community frustration over the lack of immediate and measurable results in restructuring projects.

One participant wondered, "What is 'success'?" Because the form restructuring takes is unique to each school, the meaning of success will vary with each restructuring effort. Indeed, no one set of state or national standards can be expected to apply to the many models of schooling that are likely to emerge from restructuring efforts. Each school will have to be judged on its own terms, according to what it does well, what it does poorly, and what it fails to address.

In addition to this general concern about measuring the success of restructuring, practitioners expressed two specific concerns. First, some practitioners are not content to have the success of their restructuring efforts evaluated through standardized tests and grades. To them, a more authentic measure of student performance on real-life tasks seems more appropriate.

State efforts to promote restructuring must seek appropriate ways to encourage accountability for educational outcomes at the school, district, and state levels.

Second, practitioners also expressed concern that restructuring efforts may not be given a long enough trial period to permit them to succeed. Practitioners were keenly aware of the unrealistic expectations that they, their colleagues, parents, and the public might hold for restructuring. To them, restructuring should not be viewed as a "quick fix" for the complex problems of schools.

Reflections. State efforts to promote restructuring must seek appropriate ways to encourage accountability for educational outcomes at the school, district, and state levels. Typical process-oriented accountability schemes —those that specify the subjects to be taught and the time to be spent on those subjects—are likely to be perceived as obstacles to restructuring. But so too are the typical outcomes-oriented accountability systems—those that specify student achievement on standardized tests.

Thus, state efforts to encourage restructuring should consider seriously the need for accountability but seek approaches for holding schools accountable that permit sufficient time for restructuring to be put in place and that do not dampen the enthusiasm that local professionals feel for restructuring or the effort that they are willing to expend upon it. In this light, it may be important to encourage those participating in restructuring efforts to develop their own specific, even unique, approaches to evaluating their success.

Other Implications

These findings, other survey data, and our own reflections suggest three other implications for policymakers.

I. Restructuring requires significant changes in decision-making relationships.

Several practitioners mentioned site-based management and decision making as key strategies for restructuring. Under such arrangements, principals and teachers, aided by support staff and parents, assume responsibility for what goes on in the school. And each school must harmonize its vision or agenda with the philosophy of the district. As one teacher put it,

> Truly effective change must come from people directly involved in the schools—they see the needs, they determine the relative merits or failures of all the strategies they implement.

Reflections. Policymakers need to ask themselves whether they are truly in favor of giving schools and their communities, as opposed to state boards and districts, greater control over local education. Such school-level authority is likely to lead to an even greater diversity of goals and ways of achieving them among the schools of the state. The state cannot have it both

ways. It cannot expect uniformity and restructuring to be achieved simultaneously. Policymakers must send clear signals to educators about the expectations that society has for schools and about the constraints that will be placed upon educators as they strive to meet those expectations.

With site-based management, the school, rather than the district or the state, is the center of educational decision making. By implication, site-based management espouses a change philosophy that emphasizes the importance of a building-by-building approach to educational innovation. Decentralized change initiatives set schools free to move quickly. However, there are pitfalls to be addressed when schools adopt widely divergent philosophies or practices.

Some concern arises from the specter of a loosely configured system of decentralized schools. Issues such as continuity, equity, transferability, and a common system of education providing a unifying force for the nation are also important considerations for public education.

Policymakers must strike a fine balance between decentralization and deregulation on the one hand and tradition and commonality on the other. The practitioners in this study spoke clearly about their need to control the school arena locally, but they must also understand the interest of the state or district in providing clear expectations of accountability for each school.

II. Restructuring requires the re-education of those involved.

Practitioners often indicated that they felt poorly prepared for the task of restructuring. They suggested that their efforts at restructuring demand and engender considerable personal and professional growth; in fact, 90% of the practitioners surveyed said that they had gained important new insights into schools as a result of their participation in restructuring. But as one respondent noted, "Teachers who don't or won't change will have to be retrained or they will endanger the process."

Reflections. These observations suggest, on the one hand, that teachers and principals involved in restructuring need to make a concerted effort at professional improvement. But they also suggest that other constituencies —such as communities, state and district administrators and policymakers, and teacher preparation programs— have important functions in preparing both practitioners and other participants for new roles in schools.

Policymakers need to ask themselves whether they are truly in favor of giving schools and their communities, as opposed to state boards and districts, greater control over local education.

If restructuring is to succeed, policymakers should seek ways to provide the time, technical assistance, and flexible funding that local teachers and administrators will need to develop and implement new models of schooling. An important role for the state may lie in supporting the acquisition of the knowledge and skills necessary to revolutionize the processes and results of schooling. States should ask that a substantial professional development component be included in restructuring projects to ensure that personnel are prepared to undertake the initiative.

To the extent that schools really do become different, the transition from one school to another will take on even greater significance than it does now. Students transferring from eighth grade in one middle school may find eighth grade in another completely different. There will be no guarantee that the same goals, let alone the same methods, will be in place. The transition from elementary to middle schools and from middle to high schools will require school professionals to collaborate with those in other schools. Individual students and their parents may have to take greater responsibility for making certain these transitions occur smoothly. Special orientation programs may need to be designed to make certain that new students are prepared for their new school's offerings.

Involving and re-educating the community in the purposes and practices of schooling should be encouraged as policymakers pursue restructuring. Because education professionals will be busy just doing what they think needs to be done, parents, business representatives, and members of the community who wish to be represented in the process will have to be assertive about their interests. There is no evidence from this survey to indicate that professionals will resist such involvement, but neither are they likely to go out of their way to encourage it.

III. Restructuring demands a great deal of school professionals' time.

Time is never far from the consciousness of teachers and administrators. Teachers in particular function under narrow time constraints, with little opportunity to plan, develop, refine, study, or engage in many of the myriad activities associated with restructuring. As one teacher confessed, "I'm not sure we have the time, resources, or energy to do what we know in our hearts must be done."

Reflections. A major hindrance to restructuring efforts has been the organization of the school day so that teachers have little contact with one another. As policymakers consider restructuring initiatives, thought must be given to innovative ways to organize school schedules, contractual relationships, and responsibilities for supervision of children so that school personnel have

the time they need. Practitioners in this study said that the time needed at the beginning of a restructuring project was substantial and that their work load was increased dramatically by the changes they were undertaking. The public perception that teachers are working only when they are in the classroom with students must be changed so that teaching and restructuring are supported by time for planning, research, and collaboration.

Conclusion

The restructuring movement offers an opportunity for schools to be changed comprehensively at the grassroots level. Empowering teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and students can lead to a greater sense of efficacy in schools. Change initiated by those affected most by decisions may have the potential to revolutionize the purposes, organization, and operations of schools. These same opportunities bring concerns about redesigning roles and relationships among those who work in schools, involving educators and lay persons in decision making, encouraging diversity in school offerings, and preparing those who are involved for their new roles and functions.

State and district policymakers are faced with a dilemma as they consider ways to encourage diversity and experimentation in schools while maintaining quality, continuity, efficiency, and accountability. Encouraging local initiative and serving the broader public interest will require a delicate balance between demanding high levels of performance and supporting activities that move schools in new directions. Policies should be drafted that encourage experimentation but avoid prescription, that measure success in a variety of ways, and that allow the time and flexibility necessary for schools to design their own approaches to achieving success. Involvement of parents and community members should be an integral part of any school change initiative, and provisions should be made for joint training efforts that include all participants in the change process. Finally, policymakers should be patient because substantive change takes time, particularly in an institution like education with well-entrenched traditions.

Notes

[1] The perspectives of both theorists and practitioners are presented in detail in the full research report, *Restructuring Public Schools: Theorists vs. Practitioners* (Smith, Tourgee, Turner, Lashley & Lashley, 1991).

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